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PIGEONS PONDER PENSI PELICAN'S PASSING

SMALL FLOCK VISITS L.B.

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DDT Killing Pelicans

HARBOR DISTRICT

By DICK EMERY

Brown pelicans — the funny, funny birds with the sad, sad future — are paying a September visit to the Long Beach area waterfront.

"They are hungry," fishermen say.

Biologists look unhappily at the big "satchel bills."

"Brown pelicans are dying out fast," the biologists say, in effect. "We believe it's the DDT."

Only a few years ago, the local waterfront teemed with pelicans. They bobbed just beyond the breaker line. They strolled on the beaches. They flew up and down the surfline in long single file, alternately flapping wings like barndoor doors, then gliding. Their headlong plunges for fish brought admiring "Didja see THAT?"s from beach folk.

TWO OR THREE years ago the pelicans thinned out. Last year, people were asking, "What's become of the pelicans?" In the past few days, the arrival of a small flock — five in a line, gliding over the harbor to a feet-first splashdown near Fishermen's Wharf in San Pedro — brought from spectators a "Well, what-taya know! Pelicans!"

Just how hard has DDT and related bug-killers hurt the brown pelicans?

"For example," said Robert D. Mallette, associate wildlife manager-biologist of the state Fish and Game Department at Sacramento, "10,000 pair of brown pelicans used to nest on Anacapa Island.

"Each pair raised two or three fledglings. The island produced 20 or 30 thousand baby pelicans every year.

"In the past year, only 300 pair nested on the island.

"And from all 300 nests, only 10 — a total of 10 for the whole island — only 10 young were successfully reared!"

Mallette and other biologists from the department, among them Richard Davidson, wildlife management supervisor for Region 5 headquartered at Terminal Island, blame DDT and related insecticides for the pelican wipe-out.

"We don't know as much as we would like, but chlorinated hydrocarbons, which DDT is a part of, are causing the trouble," Mallette said.

Rains wash agricultural sprays into rivers, rivers carry the poisons to sea, plankton soak up the chemicals, fish eat the plankton and finally, pelicans eat the fish, getting a concentrated dosage, Mallette said.

"One effect is that the shells of pelican eggs now are so thin that the moisture balance is upset and no embryo forms. The birds are unable to reproduce."

The comical brown bird with the church deacon personality — the brown pelican — has a normal lifespan of 20 to 30 years, Mallette said.

"WE DO NOT KNOW just how far down the pelican population has fallen. Counts are being made and we are trying to get some figures.

"The brown pelican is a top link in the food chain of the coastal waters.

"He controls fish population. He doesn't pick on any one special kind of fish; he snaps up the diseased, the old, the decrepit. Pelican flocks are a cleanup squad. They keep the fish population healthy.

"We hope he can be saved. The pelican is a migrating bird and he may find an uncontaminated food supply somewhere and replenish his kind."